

Living in Emergency: The Response of New German Documentary Theater

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Abstract

Late twentieth and early twenty-first century German documentary theater occupies a paradoxical position between aesthetic artifact and factual report. Much work in the genre thematizes exceptional historical and social phenomena which may fairly be considered emergencies. Documentary theater by its nature problematizes the boundary between fiction and fact as well as that between report and material event. The theatrical mediation of documented event as implicit explication of larger issues enjoins a cognitive response in reception. This response, if a serious consideration of a matter thought important by the audience will necessarily require an individual orientation to that issue reflecting one's deeper values and sense of self, defining one's position in relation to said issue. We propose that much German documentary theater may be meaningfully explored as the nexus of concepts of emergency, materiality, theatrical mediation, and reception. The paper is structured as (1) an overview of issues, (2) introduction of concepts, (3) a short historical survey of German documentary theater, and (4 and 5) a comparative discussion of a classic and a contemporary work (*Verdicts*) in terms of the problematics. Methodology reflects the author's synthesis of several theoretical perspectives by among others, Agamben, Bakhtin, de Beauvoir, and Foucault. We conclude that documentary theater synthesizes, as a mechanism of reception, narrativization of material events into an enacted dramatical discourse that challenges audience perspective on and re-construction of, the material referents of documentation.

Keywords

discourse, documentary theater, emergency, materiality, mediation, narrative, subjectivization

In August 2015, as refugees from the war in Syria struggled for survival on the shores of Europe, German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced her government's suspension of the European Union's so-called Dublin Protocol. Since 1990 this rule had required refugees to seek asylum in the first country into which they gained entry. Consequently, the German government began allowing larger numbers of refugees into the country than would otherwise have been the case. Beginning in January 2020, the world's nations began initiating extraordinary measures to combat the spread of COVID-19, many of which continue to this time. Most would agree that both these situations may be fairly described as *emergencies*.

Within a span of somewhat more than one hundred years, the planet has witnessed numerous humanitarian catastrophes including two world wars, genocides, and pandemics. Each of these, and others, have presented the world's societies with challenges of emergency response. They have also challenged the world's artistic and intellectual community to respond cogently and meaningfully to not only particular instances but more generally to the 'state of emergency' as cultural paradigm. Of necessity, such emergencies and condition, subsuming the lives and deaths of humans as material beings, bracket notions of the subject, its construction, its material realization, and the concept of materiality itself.

1.

Of the many ways German writers and artists have responded to these emergencies, documentary theater occupies a prominent place. Prior to Chancellor Merkel's actions for Syrian refugees, ultra-nationalist and xenophobic backlash against immigrants and asylum seekers had already begun to gain ground in the German language area. Austria and

Switzerland had witnessed the electoral successes of anti-immigrant political parties since the beginning of the current century, but such sentiment had failed to produce similar results in Germany.

Beginning in 2013 the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternatives for Germany) began to win seats in German state legislatures and since 2017 has held the third largest number in the *Bundestag*, the German parliament in Berlin. Social activists and socially engaged artists have reacted to this state of affairs in various media, including that of documentary theater. The director Volker Lösch, in his *Graf Öderland/Wir sind das Volk* (*Count Öderland/We are the People*, 2015), utilizing amateur and professional performers, fashioned a hybrid dramatization of the contemporary political scene amalgamating material from ultra-nationalist agitation and its critics from the renowned Swiss author Max Frisch's play *Count Öderland* (1951). The director and writer Falk Richter, in *Fear* (2015), produced a work somewhat closer to traditional documentary theater with material presented substantially unfiltered from news sources, as commentary on nationalist agitation (Wahl).

There is thus the inescapable feeling that emergency response to the ongoing refugee crisis of peoples fleeing both environmentally and politically unsustainable conditions has become paired with, in the words of one commentator, a "racism emergency" (Pascoët). Racism in unified Germany predates, of course, current controversies over immigration and asylum. Racism as an institutional construct is also interrogated in contemporary German documentary theater. In 2014 the Munich-based dramatists Azar Mortazavi and Christine Umpfenbach pursued this goal in *Urteile (Verdicts)*. Between 1999 and 2011 a number of bombings, bank robberies, and murders of immigrants took place in Germany. The authorities and press speculated that many of these crimes were committed by underworld figures or the

families of victims themselves. In 2011, it became apparent that these were committed by three right-wing terrorists who styled themselves the *Nationalsozialistische Untergrund* (national socialist underground) or NSU, after two of the members committed suicide and the third was arrested. Through the investigation and trial that followed, it was evident that a large network of individuals had facilitated hiding the three and that state authorities only half-heartedly attempted to solve these crimes and apprehend their perpetrators.

Umpfenbach researched the crimes and conducted interviews with friends and families of two victims who had been killed in Munich. She and Azar Mortazavi then produced a theater text about the effects of structural and institutional racism in German society. *Verdicts* comprises a collage of documentary materials augmented with poetic interludes that foregrounds the victims of right-wing terrorism from the perspective of their families and communities. These authors seek to derive perspicacity from a connection to a 'reality.' With sensitivity to the history of debates on the problematic nature of representation, however, their reality is, in the words of Umpfenbach, "subjectively colored" (Braunmüller).

Where earlier practitioners privileged documentary verisimilitude, admitting of at most, a re-structuring, Mortazavi and Umpfenbach privilege judgment as methodology. Staging and text rely less on irony and distance than shock and empathy. There is structural embrace of intermedial resources. For instance, dialogue is fashioned without interpretive differentiation from interviews, police reports, media headlines, e-mails, verse, and original text. Aesthetics and staging occupy a subsidiary role, but the admixture of text types and allusion to real events crosses the line between intellectual analysis and emotional involvement. The play attempts to make the audience feel the sense of threat experienced by the victims (Watzke). Consider a scene in which an e-mail from an official refusing an interview with Christine Umpfenbach

aligned with texts from a politician, a lawyer, and a nameless female friend that underscore the extent to which right-wing violence has been underplayed by officialdom. The psychological depth of this scene derives from the realization, uttered by the last referenced actor, that there was and probably is not just one neo-Nazi terror cell and what that realization means for members of the immigrant community (Mortazavi and Umpfenbach 54-55). The texts and events re-presented on the stage derive from the original *materializations* of violence. People died, families became bereaved. *Verdicts* seeks to reveal the societal power structures that make injustice possible.

These power structures, however, are no mere theoretical constructs but concrete constellations of actions, documents, and events commonly regarded as referents of corporeal beings and material objects, their interactions, and manipulations. *Verdicts* presents a complex of standard relationships: production, stagecraft, audience reception or participation, and additionally, as *documentary* theater, an explicit relationship to presumptive non-fictional events. An important communicative aspect derives from the noun that forms the title of the play, translating to both *verdicts* and *judgments* in English. For the philosophically oriented the latter term recalls classic disquisitions by Kant, Hegel, and Adorno. Vernacular associations in German range from those invoking the faculty of choice to judicial decision. Further signification derives from the compounding of the term into *Vorurteil* or prejudice. The particular foregrounded events form, together with the theoretical and practical aspects of its dramatic realization, a nexus of implicit relationships, among which are the material constitution of a moral and political self in relation to the depiction of documented human interactions and the social dimensions of those interactions. For the work *Verdicts*, these social

dimensions derive from aspects of German history inextricably linked to the experience of crisis and associated in vernacular perception as in some way constituting an emergency.

2.

What is an emergency? How does the concept of emergency relate to the topic at hand? The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the original associations of the word to the rising of the submerged or the disclosing of the concealed (176). The modern meaning of a situation requiring action derives differently in languages other than English, e.g. German *Notfall*, literally "case of need." Accepting the word as a semantic complex in dialogue with many significations, including that of *emergence*, we are acquainted in our lives with numerous examples: medical emergency, life-threatening emergency, national emergency, state of emergency, and others. The term, as a signifier of the political, is the object of legal interpretation and juridical theorization. Applied to the literary-theoretical and socio-political realms, the concept has been explored extensively in terms of Giorgio Agamben's explication of Carl Schmitt's "state of exception." From a semantic perspective, it is worth noting that this concept in German, *Ausnahmezustand*, is in fact the common denotation for the English: state of emergency.

Particularly since September 11, 2001, political theorization of governance by a 'permanent state of emergency' in Western democracies has gained currency. The specific point of comparison is, of course, the idea that emergency laws passed by governments that may seek to curtail established liberties in the wake of perceived terrorist activities form exceptions to the various constitutional traditions, and may with prolongation become a new norm of governance. One may think the situation as a dual entanglement. Not only does the emergency lie outside the normal flow of life, but the reaction to it, as legal sanction of abrogated norms,

residing both outside and inside (by virtue of its agreed upon legality) the judicial system, may become, as permanent dispensation of power, the new norm. Yet the exception, and in this case, the emergency so construed, illuminates the established norm through differentiation (Agamben 18). Of course, emergency response may be more benign, and designed to truly protect, as in the case of public health emergencies, although results may be controversial.

German language documentary theater addresses the issue on several levels. Much of the subject matter thematizes societal emergencies: the political chaos of the Weimar Republic, the Holocaust, immigration and xenophobia. Yet, as we shall see, such dramatization in the best cases, strives to make the abrogation of important societal norms evident. This theater seeks to subvert conventional narratives by positing alternative discourses derived from the material documentation of those stories. In a manner similar to Agamben's explication of Hegel on language (21), the play is thus both inside and outside the constructs it portrays. In this manner, it becomes its own performative exception to conventional states of affairs.

Is matter important? Are bodies important? Are bodies material? Allusion to and, frequently, documentation of physical events form the basis of this theater. Whether as part of that documentation or as a facet of dramatic artistry in its historical development, bodies and objects have told and continue to tell stories on the stage. A particularly defining dimension for documentary theater arises from the fact that the script may literally embody the materials from which the drama is derived. The philosopher John McCumber employs the term "the speaking of matter" for the material processes by which "the world's oppressed demand to be heard" (177). In much documentary theater, matter does indeed speak in this way, as we shall see.

Theorization of the body, its (un)necessary materiality, and its relation to the human condition is greatly varied. Simone de Beauvoir emphasized the importance of lived experience for the embodied self (24). For Judith Butler, performativity and cultural discourse define gender and thus the positioning of any particular body as a self in the world (22-25). The more radical position of N. Katherine Hayles finds that there may also be no necessary connection between cognition, body, and materiality (13). Particularly with the advent of information technology has it been possible to conceive of and interact with immaterial objects and subjectivities. What is the ontological status of an image consisting of pixels on a computer screen as human simulacrum, addressing the viewer via accompanying audio file with words expressing synchronous presence?

All these issues have significance for theater. Its position as *mediation* will vary in relation to underlying assumptions about the role of materiality in a given theater piece. The staged work is both conceptual and material. In the German language milieu, Erwin Piscator's utilization of stark contrasts, collage, and new technical staging effects signified a certain outlook in support of a particular political orientation. The re-worked trial transcript of Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* privileges a certain conception of authenticity discoverable in a material object. Intertextuality in Heiner Müller's work produces wide-ranging conceptual associations, in turn aesthetic, historical, material. Documentary theater is confronted also by such issues and may utilize similar techniques. Werner Kroesinger's *Q & A—Questions and Answers* confronts the audience, as participants, with a type of ethical vertigo, in that they are asked to sit next to figures portraying the prosecutor and defendant, respectively, in the trial of Adolf Eichmann, only to witness the actors' roles reversed (Irmer 20).

Documentary theater unavoidably invites paradox in that *subjects* constituted by life histories become objects of portrayal, comprised anew by the exigencies of the dramatic situation, and ultimately constituents of audience self-positioning in relation to the reception of the play. The examination of what it means to be a 'self' has a long tradition in European and German literature. Andrew Bowie observes that the late Enlightenment's interest in the constitution of one's self becomes an aspect of 'modernity' (2), and this interest, transmitted also by Fichte, is further evidenced in German literature in the works of the Romantics: Karoline von Günderrode, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Novalis (88-99).

Twentieth and early twenty-first century criticism has interrogated, in varied modes, the manner in which one, in Foucault's terms, "decides on a certain mode of being" that will determine one's "moral goal" (*Use* 28). This self-formation is not seen as a given in itself but as a dynamic entity in relation to contingent conditions. In this connection, the 'documentary' theater piece by definition interrogates the constitution of one's self in the mediation of corporeality (and/or materiality), figural construction, and socio-political orientation. Performance becomes a site for the interweaving of narratives germane to the figures and materials at issue into a multimedial discourse that enjoins audience response as a positioning to the issues uncovered.

3.

Theater fashioned from documentary sources has been an intergenerational project within the German language area. In 1925 Erwin Piscator wrote *Trotz alledem! (In Spite of Everything!)*, incorporating contemporary news articles, pamphlets, speeches, and film depicting the background and course of the German November revolution of 1918. These provided a socially conscious, in this case Marxist, politicized viewpoint through a montage of factual material

rather than character development. Rolf Hochhuth's *Der Stellvertreter* (*The Deputy*, 1963) erects a somewhat surrealistic framework freely derived from historical documents and conversations regarding the relation of the Roman Catholic Church to the policies of Nazi Germany. Heinar Kipphardt's *In der Sache J. Robert Oppenheimer* (*In the Case of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, 1964) adapted transcripts of a congressional subcommittee interview of the famed nuclear scientist and germane utterances of scientist colleagues into a dramatic script to elucidate McCarthy-era politics in the United States. Peter Weiss's *Die Ermittlung* (*The Investigation*, 1965) attempted to realize the author's dictum that documentary theater should consist of incident reporting and deviate from original materials primarily in formal presentation (67-68). Many of these plays provoked discussion of the crimes of the Nazi period, about which German postwar society had been silent, through the dramatization of 'factual' and thus 'authentic' material, as distinguished from the merely *constructed* (Irmer 18).

German documentary theater of the present concentrates heterogeneous dramatic resources on the explication of the societal tensions and dislocations attendant upon contemporary events. Older practitioners of the genre have been joined by a diverse group of younger enthusiasts such as Milo Rau, Christine Umpfenbach, and groups like *Rimini Protokoll*. The diverse subject matter(s) of these producers range from explications of political murders to violence spawned by racism and ultra-nationalism. In the 1990s, after a period in which the artform had become relatively marginal, proponents of a new documentary theater like Hans-Werner Kroesinger in works like *Q & A—Questions and Answers* (1996) began to probe contemporary society through "an elaborate understanding of media culture, the theory of deconstruction, and forms of theatre that are not primarily based on text" (Irmer 20). Unlike their counterparts in the 1960s, younger adherents, with postmodern sensibility, began to

distinguish less between primary and secondary sources, bracketing the tension between 'authentic' and 'constructed' (20).

In 2007, the Swiss director Milo Rau's company *International Institute of Political Murder (IIPM)* was founded with a focus on documenting the execution of the former Romanian dictator Nicholas Ceaușescu and his wife. The company continues to document notable historical events through film, literature, documentaries, and papers. The group *Rimini Protokoll* works with experts in various fields, including technology, to create stage and radio plays and installations to elucidate the social environment by dramaturgical means. A significant work in the genre by an older established figure is Austrian Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Schutzbefohlenen (The Wards)*, 2013/2015). This piece, concerning the plight of refugees in Austria, highlights the connection of documentary theater with lived experience and embodied mediation in theater. When the actors in a performance are real-life refugees, as is sometimes the case, bodies that have suffered confront an audience with judgments concerning the real and the fictive, and destabilize that supposed dichotomy. Would a computer-generated performance provide similarly perspicacious focalization?

Austrian theater presents a strong tradition of dramatized documentation of real world events, such as Karl Kraus's renowned *The Last Days of Mankind* (1919), employing both direct quotation and fantasy sequences. Peter Wagner's *March, the 24th* (1995) reworks the massacre of two hundred Hungarian Jews by German troops near the end of World War Two into a self-described work of fiction, a parable. Jelinek's *The Wards* deploys passages from Aeschylus, Ovid, Hölderlin, Rilke, and Heidegger as commentary on a text fashioned from protests by asylum seekers in Vienna over unfair and inhumane treatment by Austrian authorities. More recently, the director Peter Arp, in *Srebrenica*, recounts the tragedy of

genocide in the Bosnian conflict of 1995 through the words of a survivor, a United Nations translator. In regard to many of these artistic practices it is perhaps apt to remark the extent to which documentarism may reflect less the encounter with factual events and serve more as a "tool of the regeneration of aesthetic conventions" (Beumers and Lipovetsky 560).

4.

In what way, then, does documentary theater contribute to an understanding of the intersection of emergency, materiality, mediation, and lived experience? A short generalization might be that documentary theater consists in discourses that are not only verbal but material, issuing from modes of speech that construct alternatives to those disclosed in everyday existence. The following comparison will further clarify these issues.

The text of Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* consists of edited verbatim testimony from one of the 'Auschwitz' trials in Frankfurt in 1963. In this sense, the work speaks to, perhaps, not so much a societal emergency as to the related sense of the term, an emergence—an uncovering of the repressed. The aesthetics of this and other works of its type present for its enthusiasts a corrective to the self-absorption of a West German society seeking to escape dealing with guilt in the aftermath of World War II. The focus is on the text, presented without punctuation by anonymized witnesses and defendants. Yet auctorial intervention is revealed not only in these particulars but also in the arrangement of utterances into *cantos*, after Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The declamation and overall staging suggest a debt to Brecht in the minimalist treatment, the accompanying *estrangement effects* that confront the audience, and in didactic purpose.

For the German theater critic Thomas Irmer, this type of documentary theater marks "a shift from the poetic drama and the theatre of the absurd, which were dominant during the

1950s, to the overtly political theatre of the 1960s" (17). Weiss has explained that his documentary theater advocates a practice wherein reality, even if apparently opaque, may be explained in detail. The 'documented' work critiques presumed factual events through their re-constellation and embodiment on the stage. The performance might be considered the conceptual inscription of the materiality of an event within a new medium, enacting differentiation of facets of that materiality that were obscured by their conventional real-world objectification.

The play thus confronts the audience with a synthetic realism for serious political purposes, comprising a discourse that requires audience and societal response, either in approval or opprobrium. This requisite response exerts a performative claim encompassing (in a Foucauldian sense) *the power relationships* involved, creating a position relative to that claim through individual response. This type of theater attempts, then, to situate facticity into this milieu in the form of the claims of actual power structures, in opposition to what some, particularly during the mid-twentieth century, regarded as the aestheticization of the patently fictive in the arts or the escapism of popular culture, and the subjectivity which is bound up with those values.

Azar Mortazavi's and Christine Umpfenbach's co-authored *Verdicts* (2014) works with similar problematics yet with a difference born of contemporary artistic and social engagement. The work takes as its starting point the murder of two members of the immigrant community, one of Greek and the other of Turkish ethnicity. The circumstances surrounding these tragedies are given voice through the verbalizing of interviews and statements by, among others, the victims' relatives, friends, a police reporter, a journalist, a lawyer, a priest, a politician, and the leader of the investigative murder commission, as well as the inclusion of

relevant documents. Several freely composed poetic interludes provide commentary on the events and the immigrant experience in Germany in general. The staging is usually spare, an open space with several utilitarian chairs along a back wall. A maple tree hangs suspended by the roots from the ceiling—signifying what? Perhaps the homelessness of the unaccepted immigrant community or an evocation of the tree-lined streets on which the murders took place (Walter)?

Inversion of expectation is apparent in the opening scene with a testimonial by the brother of one victim about the extent to which the family considered itself integrated into German society. As further texts are introduced, the audience becomes aware that the investigation and journalistic reporting of these crimes inexplicably focuses suspicion on the migrant community itself and discounts suggestions of native German and Neo-nazi involvement (Mortazavi and Umpfenbach 13, 37-39). *Verdicts* both issues from and enacts conditions of emergency in several senses. Even since the inception of this play, right-wing and racist violence has steadily increased in Germany. Xenophobia among the citizenry is well documented, and it is what some call the "structural and institutional discrimination" (Sharifi 67) that constitutes an exception to the societal legal and moral codes that inheres within both as an inversional norm. Yet the contradictory signifiers in the double status of being both inside and outside those norms allows a work such as *Verdicts*, as critique, to uncover the submerged animosities and serve as warning signal for a too long neglected societal emergency.

An actor portrays a merchant recounting the sight of a victim's body—shot through the head. Another actor gives voice to the anguish of the victim's wife as she recalls the police informing her that she could not view the body soon after the shooting since an autopsy was

being conducted immediately (Mortazavi and Umpfenbach 17). There is no corpse on the stage, only living bodies narrating an event that the audience may only conceptually apprehend. The victims, like the audience, were corporeal intelligences. They perceived their bodies as integral to their sense of self. Yet these bodies were not just biological artifacts—the mind's construal of chemical processes as a putative entity—but constellations of lived experiences and familial and cultural connections. The importance of this realization for the play is placarded by the titles of the poetic interludes, "Bodies of Shame." Each illustrates an aspect of the immigrant experience in Germany in its frustrations with lack of empathy by the society in which many have lived their entire lives. The materiality of the victims and their worlds, like that of the actors and audience, is realized as spatio-temporal event. When this materiality is re-constellated in theater, the memory of the original, as documented, becomes just as materially inscribed, by other bodies, in another medium. While this dramaturgical inscription could be dismissed as mere simulacrum, it actually enacts a *dialogical*, in a Bakhtinian sense, relationship of event to text, which extends the narrative also to cognitive processing, becoming in turn a part of that developing narrative.

5.

The issue of the *mediation* of event both by documentary inscription and through stagecraft becomes apparent in a passage from *Verdicts* in which it is revealed that political investigation of the underlying crimes was hampered by the fact that witness testimony was not videorecorded and consisted therefore only of handwritten summaries prepared by the initial investigators (51-53). At this level, then, subtracting bodies and physical objects, event is reduced to mere ink on a page from which a mnemonic record may be abstracted.

Documentary theater analyzes and confronts this minimal re-presentation for aesthetic and

critical ends. Perhaps similar to the transformation of computer code into legible and visual, if virtual, instantiation, as alluded to earlier, theater also functions as a site (literally and conceptually) for the transformation of information into material realization.

It might be asked: is documentary theater more about *witnessing* or assessing a *lived experience*? Considering the multiplicity of possible signifiers, it could be either, both, or neither, depending on the work and the intellectual disposition of the audience in reception. For example, Piscator's *Despite Everything!* bears witness to and implicitly recommends to the viewer a Marxist political outlook within the Weimar Republic of Germany. Hochhuth's *The Deputy* probes the nature of responsibility in relation to the stance of Pope Pius XII towards the implementation of measures that led to the Holocaust. Weiss's *The Investigation* works with the assumption that the lived experience of genocide may be interrogated from almost verbatim trial transcripts, uncovering repressed societal guilt, as referenced earlier. The contemporary group *Rimini Protokoll* seeks to "expand the means of the theatre to create new perspectives on reality." Their 'post-dramatic' satirical offerings, often utilizing technology in unexpected ways, include an adaptation of Karl Marx's *Capital*, for the stage, and a terrarium of locusts at the *Schauspielhaus Zürich* (Zürich Playhouse) documented by miniature video cameras, as a commentary on human destiny after climate change.

Contemporary European theater inherits its own history of dramatic reception. The dramaturgical groundwork for Piscator is Expressionism, for Weiss and mid-twentieth century creators, the intellectualized *epic theater* realized as putative facticity. In Umpfenbach's *Verdicts* one perceives, as an echo perhaps of Lessing, the possibility of identification and empathy in the descriptions of indignities visited upon the protagonists. There is interrogation of social processes—although without the scientific pretensions of Naturalism—in uncovering

mechanisms of discrimination. Nameless actors questioning the statements of those portraying politicians suggest a debt to Brecht. Additionally, audience reading of performance technics will supplement and diversify a work's intended thematics. All of which places a work like *Verdicts* in dialogue with a great number of textual and visual significations through which the audience member may cognitively apprehend and individually construct a *discourse* communicating a distinctive viewpoint. Text, stagecraft, affect, internal logic, signification, and perspective all combine to communicate or perhaps to subvert the communication of this perspective, but in either case the presentation will cognitively situate the viewer or participant in relation to that perspective, at some level, whether perceived as witness, a commentary on lived experience, or something else entirely. It is the incorporation into the ongoing lived experience of the theater-goer that ultimately becomes determinative in this regard.

A discourse may be deployed for a multitude of purposes—some prescriptive, some proscriptive, as Foucault elaborates ("Discourse" 215-224). In this sense, the performance becomes a site for the interweaving of narratives germane to that performance into a discourse that elicits individual response and ideally the interrogation of the self that art in general and here, documentary theater, elicits. However, one's overarching values and orientations (which may also be transitory) are constituted, when one is confronted by a discourse of intellectual or moral substance, one's response may assent to, or question (at least partially), or ignore those values. Self-positioning thus becomes a fluid process in relation to specific problematics as when, at the end of *Verdicts*, for instance, a victim's brother asks why everything foreign is so often denied in Germany (Mortazavi and Umpfenbach 58). Does one or does one not interrogate one's own judgments, prejudices, and responsibility in the social order (Bakhtin 68)? In relation to which of many behavioral alternatives does one ultimately position oneself?

Discourses do not arise fully formed. The particular way of talking evinced by a discourse may be decomposed into individual narratives. These may situate the material referents of the play into temporal sequences and thematic categories. They may also position the individual, in reception, within the culture of one's society or present the potential to subvert inherited social constructions. Ultimately, they will frame alternative discourses that situate the "individual self " into "an ongoing process of construction" through social interaction (Jørgensen and Phillips 109). Discourses that arise from the types of documentary theater under discussion actually enact the deconstruction of power structures and the reconfiguration of one's position in relation to this deconstruction. Christine Umpfenbach states that *Verdicts* not only thematizes right-wing extremism but importantly the connection between bourgeois culture and racism. She asks what has gone structurally wrong within German society (Walter)? It is this last query that reveals the subversive core of the play, in that it *marshals the documentation that is used to administer* and support societal power structures to disclose pervasive racism and to discursively call the structure of German society *in toto* into question as an emergency that must be dealt with now.

How then, in *Verdicts*, do the problematics of emergency, materiality, its mediation in theater, and audience reception make a claim on human 'modes of being,' and what is that claim? Viewing the concept of emergency as homologous to some of Agamben's theorizations of 'the exception,' as introduced earlier, situates the former also into his discourse of *biopolitics*. Commencing with the positing of that mode of being which was excluded from the political sphere of the classical world—Greek *zoē*—natural life (in opposition to *bios* or political life), which Agamben terms *bare life* (2), becomes, at the onset of modernity, the bearer of rights but at the same time, as fundament of citizenship in a nation state, also its own

instrument of exclusion (126-130). *Verdicts* structures its discourse in terms of judgments of this problematic. The play consists of twelve scenes vivifying interviews of friends and relatives of the NSU murder victims as well as other principals to the tragedies. Their dialogues constitute the testimony of those excluded from the judgments in official judicial inquiries.

Particularly poignant constituents of the work are Azar Mortazavi's poetic interludes "Bodies of Shame" based on her experiences in Germany as a child of an immigrant parent. Here, not only does the excluded as societal exception thereby critique the so-called normative, but a conception of the 'real' emerges from the embodiment of the life experience of those excluded. The real of *Verdicts* is incontrovertibly political. For Agamben, "refugees . . . represent a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state" (131). They once again introduce *bare life* into the political order without the cloak of citizenship. *Verdicts* unmasks the ways in which German authorities and ordinary citizens, through *their* pre-judgment of an essential opposition between those who should be inside and outside the socio-political order, cognitively, materially, and juridically relegate the migrant community to one of natural life only, as despised exception to the broader economic and civic life of the modern German nation-state. When *Verdicts* concludes with the pronouncement that "one must see what actually is" (Mortazavi and Umpfenbach 59), the audience is challenged to find Foucault's "certain mode of being" that defines one's "moral goal" (*Use* 28) in relation to this discourse-through-drama of the emergency of racism in contemporary societies. The play's final words, "I don't want to sleep," are a call to action.

Conclusion

Much German documentary theater, particularly recent works like *Verdicts*, proceed from the

premise of a societal emergency and seek to vivify and explicate this situation on the basis of material documentation and attendant circumstances. Yet the process of dramaturgical adaptation may interrogate not only purported facts but also the bases on which such facts and their material referents are commonly assumed valid. Azar Mortzavi and Christine Umpfenbach challenge audiences to acknowledge the voice of the unheard and the marginalized in society with the goal of affecting social change. Other producers may invite viewers to reflect more on dramatic structuring and performance. The very diversity of significations and possible receptions brackets the relationship of self to that which is purportedly constitutive of documentary theater as a genre, and which here functions perhaps as a cognitive void to be filled, namely, 'the real.' Inherent in the genre is also the danger of closure, the mere replacement of official discourses with a similarly 'authoritative' metanarrative. To this point, it should be evident that works must project the complexity and contingency of actual life experience in order to enjoin the formation of a mode of being that defines a position in response to the discourse projected from the stage (Sieg). Perhaps the primary message communicated by contemporary German documentary theater is that profitable engagement with the material world will be not in terms of data only. It will require appreciation for its constitution in human lives and conduct, and the consequences to oneself and society of any construction of reality that ignores this guiding orientation.

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